



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: December 10, 2020

Agenda Item: Lost Trail CE, Region 1

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes the purchase of a conservation easement (CE) on 7,256 acres of important timberland and wildlife habitat in northwestern Montana near Marion. This property shares nearly 7 miles of border with the 7,876-acre U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge. The project would protect habitat for two large elk herds, one resident and one migrating north from the Flathead Indian Reservation to this property and eventually to an area just west of Whitefish. The project area includes the north slope of Dredger Ridge, a favorite walk-in elk hunting area that currently has over 400 days/year of public hunting use. This property is also habitat for grizzly bear and Canada lynx, species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. These species, as well as other highly mobile species, use this area as a movement corridor linking Glacier National Park to the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness.

The appraised value of the CE is \$4,550,000, a 20 percent increase from the preliminary estimate in 2018. The purchase price for the conservation easement would not exceed \$4,150,000. Funding for this project would be derived from a combination of U.S. Forest Service Forest Legacy Program, Habitat Montana, and Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust funds.

Public Involvement Process & Results: An EA was released for public comment from October 9 to November 8, 2020, and included a virtual public hearing on October 28. Legal notices were published twice in three local newspapers and the *Helena Independent Record* and the EA was posted on the FWP webpage. Notices were sent to all adjoining landowners. FWP received 15 public comments with all but one in support of the CE proposal; a letter from the owner of the underlying mineral estate giving FWP formal notice that 95 percent of the proposed CE area is subject to their existing and dominant mineral rights. All issues raised by those who commented are addressed in the decision document.

Alternatives and Analysis: Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: 1) Alternative A (Proposed Action) - FWP would acquire a conservation easement on approximately 7,256 acres of forestland near Marion. The land would continue to be managed using sustainable forest practices described in the management plan, while also protecting the valuable fish and wildlife habitat found on the property and continuing to allow compatible public recreation opportunities; and 2) Alternative B (No Action) - If the project is not completed as proposed, the owner would likely sell the property without any of the restrictions of the proposed conservation easement. Public access and future management would be determined by future owners.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission approve FWP purchasing a conservation easement on the proposed 7,256-acre Lost Trail project to help ensure conservation values and associated public benefits would be retained.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve FWP's purchase of the Lost Trail Conservation Easement as presented.